PITTA

Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
New Series Volume 11 Number 4 May 2014

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 11th May 2014, 6.00AM: Kasu Brahmananda Reddy (KBR) National Park, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad.

Spread over 400 acres, this park was originally the Chiran Palace grounds. Easily accessible due to its location in the heart of the city, the KBR Park is a haven for Partridges and Peafowl, and one can expect to see some scrubland birds as well. The lake in the park, and its surrounds, can also throw up some interesting water birds.

We have also been invited to carry out a census of the Peafowl population in the park and the Forest Department will provide us with necessary support. This would, therefore, be an interesting addition to our normal birding.

This will be a half-day trip. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532).

INDOOR MEETING: Talk by Ms Farida Tempal on 'Urban Biodiversity'
Tuesday, 13th May 2014, 6.00PM: Goethe-zentrum Hyderabad, 20 Journalist's Colony, Road No. 3, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500 034. (For directions, please contact 94905-09251 or 040-65526443/23350040)

Ms Farida Tempal is the State Director of WWF, Andhra Pradesh State Office. She will enlighten us on various aspects of 'Urban Biodiversity'. This is a very significant and important topic nowadays and a must-attend opportunity for nature lovers like us.

Day of the Eagle

Text and photos: Humayun Taher

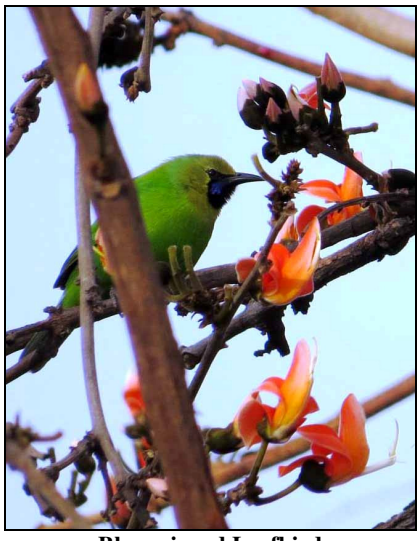
Crested (or Changeable) Hawk Eagle

I call it the Phantom! There is, to my mind, something indescribably mysterious and awe-inspiring in a close sighting of this magnificent creature. I had never been able to get enough of this splendid predator, no matter how often I see it!

The phantom is the Crested (or Changeable) Hawk Eagle (*Nisaetus cirrhatus*); one of the largest of the forest eagles found in this part of the world, and a fast and fierce predator withal. Reasonably common around these areas, it still is not easy to see. Its habit of living in dense forests is deplorable and not at all conducive to good sightings. I know one pair that had built a nest in a tree which was in very good view from a slight promontory. I had once spent three full happy days sitting under a tree on this promontory, my old handycam mounted on a rickety tripod, taking a good thee hours of footage of this nest, with a young bird in it. Unhappily, a resort was built recently on this same promontory and it was found necessary to chop down several trees for the purpose. In this process, the nest tree was also sacrificed and the eagles have shifted their quarters. And be it remembered that this resort is supposed to be a "Nature Retreat". Nature certainly has retreated!

In the heavily wooded valleys of the N… range, the participants of this year's bird-race obtained some capital exposures of this interesting creature. I was assured that the bird is a resident of this area and, moreover, that it is regularly seen. That was enough for me, and I immediately started to formulate plans to visit the place as soon as possible. There was no way I was going to give up the chance to get a good look at this phantom.

And so, early morning of 9th March found us sipping the inevitable *chai* at a roadside *chai* shop, en route to the home of the phantom. The weather was sultry, there was a hint of rain in the air and the sun was playing hide-and-seek. Mixed feelings here, joy at the coolness and disappointment at the lack of good sunlight. I must add however, that I had informed my companions before we started out that, if they were unsuccessful in getting me a sighting of the Crested Hawk-Eagle, then they must expect to hear a certain amount of cribbing from me. Lawrence, having some small experience of my cribbing earlier, was getting particularly anxious as the morning wore on and no eagles were forthcoming! But, if there were no eagles, there were other birds, equally interesting.



Blue-winged Leafbird

A flowering Flame-of-the-Forest tree attracted a trio of Blue-winged Leafbirds (*Chloropsis cochinchinensis*). The bright green birds contrasted beautifully against the pink and red of the flowers as they flitted around the tree, pausing here and there to snap at a bee or take a refreshing sip of the sweet nectar. A couple of tiny little Oriental White-eyes (*Zosterops palpebrosus*), equipped with white-rimmed monocles on each eye, pursued insects and the odd sip of nectar, to keep body and soul together while waiting for the next insect to arrive. Nature's sapphire, a Verditer Flycatcher (*Eumyias thalassinus*) was seen in a nearby shrubbery, resplendent in beautiful cobalt-blue plumage. Other flycatchers were also flitting around – the brilliant white ribbons gave away the male Asian Paradise Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*) and, from a nearby bush, a Tickell's Blue Flycatcher (*Cyornis tickelliae*) poured forth his liquid warbling song. Other sounds were also to be heard such as a Grey-bellied Cuckoo (*Cacomantis passerinus*); a movement overhead gave us a Large Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina macei*) flying past… the list goes on, many of them equally interesting and certainly a joy to see.

Grey-bellied Cuckoo

Strolling along as we continued to spot interesting feathered friends, we found our way barred by a swiftly flowing stream. Removing our shoes and rolling up our trousers, we stepped into the chilly, muddy, swift-flowing waters and splashed across. From here, it was a straight walk to the backwaters of the little lake that lies on the edge of the forest, in a lovely wooded depression at the end of the valley. We peered through the binocs at the reeds and bushes standing in the shallow waters and were able to see a couple of Kingfishers and a brace or so of Pochards. Just as we were discussing the best place to set up the scope, there was a disturbance on the other side of the lake. Forgotten were the Pochards and Kingfishers, the four of us just stood there and gaped in wonder as the phantom suddenly glided out of the woods and alighted on a nearby tree. A split second of indecision and then we were all four electrified!

Crested (or Changeable) Hawk Eagle

The magnificent bird was perched on a tall thinly foliaged tree, in plain view. I got him in the binoculars and gasped in wonder as the piercing yellow eyes looked full into me. Grabbing my camera, I hastened forward and found a vantage point from which to make a few exposures. In my excitement, I walked straight into a rather moist bog! Heaving myself out, I was pleased to note that the bird was still on its perch. The camera went into rapid action and the bird didn't like it. It suddenly took off and gliding over my head, landed in a rather dense bamboo clump. Fortunately, it was sitting sufficiently exposed for me to make a few more rather long-range exposures.

Then I dispensed with the camera, reached for my binoculars and continued to gaze in wonder at the magnificent bird, until it suddenly disappeared into the trees from whence it came. Only then did I realise that my shoes were completely covered in sticky and slimy mud and my trousers were equally well-irrigated. I looked like one of those sons-of-toil-buried-beneath-tons-of-soil blokes. But who cares – we had finally got a close and good look at the phantom of the forests, and managed to make a few decent exposures too.

My comrades were delighted with my pleasure. Lawrence in particular, was also much relieved and didn't fail to remind me that he had kept his part of the bargain! Acknowledging the deep debt I owed them we repaired to the stream where I gave my shoes and trousers a thorough washing (I hasten to add however, that I did not find it necessary to take my trousers off to wash them!). Once the offending grime and mud was removed, we started to contemplate the return. So back to the car, a capital breakfast, a cup of the steaming oolong and we once more hit the road, to begin our journey back. A splendid trip ending with a list of over 70 species: what better way to spend a morning!

Cattle Egrets roosting

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Report – Indoor Meeting - 15th April 2014
Talk by Dr Ajay Gaur on 'Wildlife Conservation using Genetic Approach'

Nimesh Ved

Introduction

Dr Gaur is a Senior Scientist and Project Leader at Laboratory for the Conservation of Endangered Species (LaCONES), an annex of CCBM. His areas of research interest are Conservation Genetics and Molecular Ecology of endangered species, especially large cats, ungulates and reptiles.

LaCONES' objectives are:

- Monitoring of genetic variation
- Establishment of gene and cell banks
- Fertility analysis
- Artificial insemination
- In vitro fertilization (IVF) and embryo transfer
- Cloning

Background

Dr. Gaur shared his experiences with the audience with an interesting mix of technical data and stories behind the data. He touched upon a range of projects and activities of the CCMB and was able to retain audience's interest for a duration exceeding 1.5 hours.

The crux of the presentation was how Genetics could be put to use in wildlife conservation for a range of species.

Snippets from the talk

The cats

a. Leopards

Conservationists warn that at the present rate of attrition, with an estimated 1000 poaching deaths every year, leopards could disappear from India by the end of the decade.

DNA can help in identification of the individual's sex and this is put to use in case of leopards. Given the rate at which leopards are poached it is crucial to help indicate if the remaining populations have a healthy sex ratio. This is a priority species and DNA has a significant role to play.

b. Snow Leopards

LaCONES have a project going on in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand and intend to soon expand their efforts to include Jammu and Kashmir and Sikkim.

Approximately 400 to 700 individuals survive in the wild and the project aims to look at their presence, numbers, genetic-diversity and sex-ratio. The DNA in case of this species is obtained primarily by scraping urine sprays. Also with Snow Leopards efforts are also on to collect DNA of the Red Fox – a predator which shares the landscape with Snow Leopard.

DNA is the best possible method to establish presence for species like Snow Leopard where the sightings at best are very difficult. They first confirmed its presence in Uttarakhand and since then, the WWF camera-traps have also been successful in capturing them.

c. Asiatic Lion

This, Dr Gaur said, was a project close to his heart. Asiatic lions, confined to a single location in the wild - the Gir Forest in Gujarat - are the focus of special conservation efforts and are highly protected. Their studies have pointed out that while the population is currently safe genetically, one catastrophe could wipe them out. Also, the Gir forest has exceeded its capacity. It thus makes sense to shift them to an alternate location.

d. Tigers

While they do take up a lot of work on tigers, his colleague Anuradha had discussed the species in the recent past in another BSAP talk, so Dr Gaur did not quite venture into it.

Wildlife Crime

Genetics appears to have changed the manner in which we look at wildlife crime. This was a fascinating part of the discussion.

Conventional methods for forensic species identification in wildlife crimes are mainly based on morphological and immunological procedures, which have limited applications for old and degraded specimens. DNA based species identification now has become an advent tool in wildlife forensic to investigate confiscated biological samples and is able to reveal whether the source of sample is human or animal and, if animal, which species of animal.

Dr. Gaur shared several interesting incidents to buttress his point.

One featured a snake-wine bottle from a local bar in Karnataka. The authorities suspected the snake to be an Indian cobra *Naja Naja*, which is a scheduled animal under WLPA 1972. Based on the morphological examination, other competent authorities certified the specimen to be that of an Indian cobra *Naja Naja*. However, in order to conclusively settle the identity of the species, the specimen was sent to their laboratory for DNA based species identification. Based on sequence comparison, the case report was prepared with the snake species in wine-bottle identified as the Indo-Chinese spitting cobra *(N. siamensis*). On the basis of their report, the forwarding authority filed a case in court of law against the bar owners for illegal hunting and smuggling of a highly venomous snake, the Indo-Chinese Spitting Cobra, which is also an endangered species.

A forest department officer suspected hunting of a scheduled species and that it was being camouflaged as being that of chicken by the culprit. To take it further the officer sent over meat as also the wooden block used for chopping confiscated along with to them for DNA testing. The sequence analysis revealed that while the cooked meat was chicken the DNA obtained from the wooden block was of an Indian Peafowl; a species protected by law.

Dr Gaur showed a series of images that brought out the products that used prohibited wildlife derivates and shared how DNA had been put to use to confirm the crime. These ranged from ostrich bone heels and snake skins in shoes to ivory products (DNA is also put to use to identify the fakes!)

Other incidents

The audience was surprised to learn about the wide range of uses that DNA is put to. The high level of interest and involvement that Dr. Gaur espouses to his work was apparent in the manner in which he described some of these.

Officials at Chennai zoo suspected a carnivore of visiting their premises and causing panic in the zoo as also the nearby villages. Officials, however, were unsure of the identity of the species. CCMB was assigned to look up the case. From the DNA analysis of the fecal material collected the species was confirmed to be a leopard. This was proved true few days later when the individual was trapped in the premises.

Wildlife departments are increasingly making use of DNA to identify the culprit – in other words the human-eating mammal. This has been put to use for both tigers and lions. If 2 tigers or lions are suspected of devouring human beings DNA could help identify the culprit and thus enable the other individual to be re-released in the wild as opposed to being put in captivity.

There also have been incidents where they have been approached on non-wildlife issues. Like identification of meat in a particular dish or that let at a religious place and they have been able to resolve the issues on hand.

Other points

DNA analysis can help ascertain

- Where the population came from and when – even in case of isolated populations.
- Genetic purity and hybridization in a population. Earlier, in India, the Asiatic Lions were bred with African Lions – primarily in circuses and now this has been brought to a halt. They have an ongoing project on the Water Buffalo on the purity aspect; only 9 individuals of the species remain in the wild in Central India and there is a separate population in north-eastern states.

This is a non-intrusive manner of dealing with wildlife as well as DNA is obtained from fecal matter in most cases. In case of birds even feathers could tell the story. However collecting the fecal matter early helps as DNA is better retained then and feathers help when part touching skin is retained.

They work with birds as well and have a project on finches. The interesting aspect with birds is that they may appear different when different genetically and vice versa. Birds are collected from the market and even mistnetted for the purpose.

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A pleasant evening ramble

Text and photos: Humayun Taher

An afternoon trip to the Ameenpur Lake…? After all, why not! A very interesting and picturesque spot and, being almost in the heart of the city, one that can be reached in quick time.

We start off just after lunch and are soon at the small marsh which is the precursor of the main lake. This little marsh has given us plenty of interesting sightings in the past and this time is very little different. We don't see a great number of birds, it is true, but there are a few. A trio of Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) chicks, looking incongruously like the three musketeers stare at us in horror as we creep up close. A few Common Moorhens (*Gallinula chloropus*) and a pair of Bronze-winged Jacanas (*Metopidius indicus*) haunt the marsh. White-throated Kingfishers (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) are heard calling and a Black-winged Kite *(Elanus caeruleus)* is hovering about in the distance.

Purple Swamphen young

Singing Bushlark

A larkish-looking bird perched on a tall telegraph pole has us frantically reaching for our field guides, and we are able to identify it as the Singing Bushlark (*Mirafa cantillans*). Well satisfied we proceed further to the main lake.

There is still a considerable amount of water here and, what is more, there is considerable bird-life too. A single Knob-billed or Comb Duck (*Sarkidiornis melanotos*) flies overhead, much to our delight. In the shallows on the far side of the lake are scattered several Grey Herons (*Ardea cinerea*), Egrets of all four varieties and some Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*). I am interested to note that one of the stilts has the entire back of the neck and crown black. This particular plumage is not seen very often but I have got records of a similar bird from this very spot twice before. The only other time I have spotted this particular variant of plumage is in a bird I saw on the Gandipet Lake last year. These throwback plumages need to be investigated more thoroughly. There has to be some good reason why they occur.

In the reeds close to where we are standing, a few Black-throated Weavers *(Ploeus benghalensis)* are getting ready for their nuptials. The males, sporting their brilliant yellow and black plumage are most conspicuous and very natty. While Anand goes to try and get some photos of these, the rest of us find ourselves besieged by a small army of little boys, all eager to peer through our binoculars and see how close the birds seem. One enthusiastic little chap can't contain his impatience and is making desperate attempts to peer through my binoculars while they are still on my neck. In the process, I almost get a dislocated shoulder. The enthusiasm of these fellows is interesting. I wager these little fellows will be telling of their adventures today for many a moon.

Meantime, we decide to proceed further. So, much to the disappointment of our audience, we climb back into the car and take off towards the last of the three lakes in this complex. This is a small, reed-girt sheet of water, not more than a few hundred square yards in area. The surrounding area, we are horrified to note, has been completely dug up. The scouts of the earth and sand mafia have found this place and I am now terrified of what their combined plundering will do to this pristine habitat. I fervently hope that the local villagers (who own the fishing rights on these ponds and lakes) take action against the excavators. Maybe a word in season to the local sarpanch is indicated.

Streaked Weaver

We park the car and treat ourselves to a glass of cold orange Tang. This refreshing beverage cools us down a bit and gives us the courage to tackle the stern task of climbing up the rocky face of the hill which is our immediate objective. It is a stiff climb, rendered difficult by the fact that in some places it is necessary to walk across a sloping rock-face. A false step here can be quite painful as there is nothing to stop us until we reach the bottom of the hill. However, by delicately planting our feet firmly and carefully ahead of us, we regain level ground.

The view from up here can only be described as breath-taking. Away down in the distance is an army training ground and we see a game of volleyball in progress. As we stare down at the game we realise we are not the only spectators; some six or seven peafowl are also caught up in the game and are strolling around quite close to the players. This is a clear example of how confiding the birds can get if once they are used to humans and realise that they will not be harmed.

The nearby quarry is inhabited today by the resident pair of Common Kingfishers (*Alcedo atthis)* and a bunch of village boys enthusiastically chucking stones into the rock pool, occasionally misjudging the distance and showering us with water. This disturbance quite obviously has caused the birds to temporarily desert the place. So we decide to try the other spot, behind the bund of the little reed pond. To get there, it is necessary to take a different route and climb down the hill from the side opposite to that from which we ascended. Nothing loth, we take the trail, occasionally stopping to climb up on a rock and survey the surrounding area to determine the easiest way to descend without actually sliding all the way down.

Red-rumped Swallow

All is well; we find a route that seems to be quite passable and so proceed cautiously, now and then having to struggle through some dense shrubbery. And there are interesting sights to be seen along the way; a small group of Red-rumped Swallows (*Cecropis daurica*) are perched on a thorny bush. Sana is quite overcome by the birds and spends long minutes observing them. We decide that at least five of the birds in this group are juveniles, probably very recently fledged. The season seems to fit: last month, when I had visited the hills, we saw a Red-rumped Swallow engaged in feeding young birds on a nest, so the timing is right. We dawdle with this group a while, but the sinking sun tells us to hurry down before we get caught in the dark while still up on the hill. None of us want to risk climbing down in the dark.

Reluctantly disentangling ourselves from the Swallow family we start down again, struggling through the scrub and occasionally hopping from rock to rock like some two-legged Chamois! It is as we are struggling to climb down a particularly slippery, sloping rock that we see them! Two young Great Horned Owls or the Indian Eagle Owls (*Bubo bengalensis*) sit placidly on a large boulder ahead of us. The adult, a corpulent bird, sits on the side of this boulder, partially hidden by a shawl of shrubbery.

Perhaps the presence of the adult has inspired the young birds to come out into the open; or maybe they are just getting ready to start their evening forays. Whatever the reason, they sit there looking sleepily at us through those huge golden-orange eyes, occasionally going so far as to give us a wink when our exclamations get a trifle louder than normal. We had come prepared to see just one of these birds and now there are three of them in front of us, just sitting there and taking the air. The shades of dusk are almost upon us but Anand is already in action with his camera, which sounds like a machine-gun as he goes into rapid-fire mode. He is determined to try and creep closer so off he goes. The rest of us sit there staring at these magnificent birds until one of the young ones suddenly flies off and simultaneously, the adult becomes extremely alert, raising its ear-tufts and glaring truculently towards the ground.

Indian Eagle Owl young

Wondering at the reason for this, we realise that Anand has succeeded in approaching quite close to the birds. Lazily blinking at the camera lens, the remaining juvenile apparently decides that such things should be taken philosophically. The adult is not quite convinced and prudently retreats followed suddenly by yet another adult that we had not seen. A cleft in the rock face hard by gives us a clue where it came from. But the second youngster… well, he's going nowhere! He can't be bothered with humans creeping around taking pictures.

Reluctantly deciding that it is time to go, we bid farewell to this magnificent bird and so back to the car; another refreshing glass of tang and some sandwiches put new life into us. The Black-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) are waking up by now, and we see the big birds flying overhead, heading towards the main lake, occasionally giving forth their loud "*Waaaak*". Common Indian Nightjars (*Caprimulgus asiaticus*) start their chuckling call from close by; some three birds are calling to each other. I'm quite sorry I came out without my torch today. And the headlights of the car don't help very much either. Slightly disappointed at this, we take our leave of this interesting spot. As to the list, well two of us got two lifers each and the final total came out to some 63 species in less than four hours of rambling. What more can one ask for from our most excellent and co-operative Saint Patrick!

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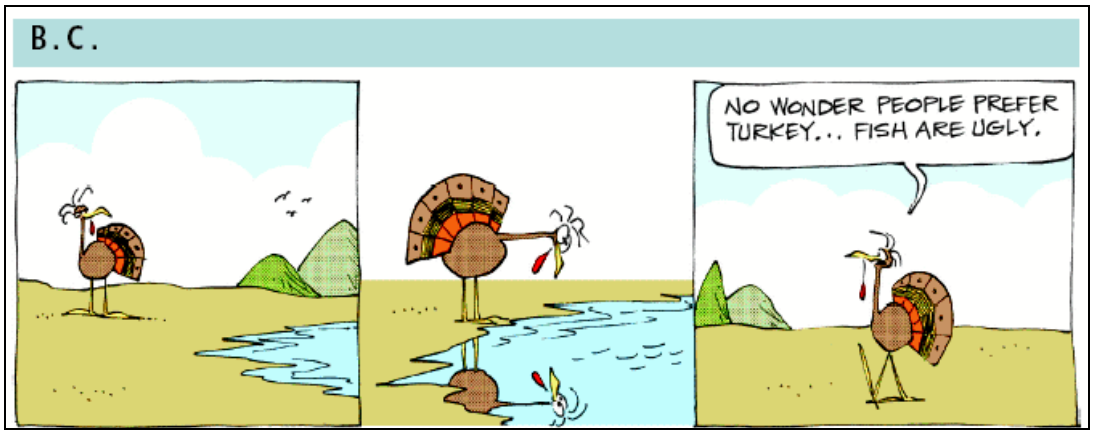
Bird Humour



(From Bombay Times, 27-09-2012)

Bird of the Month

Text and photos: Umesh Mani

Asian Koel (*Eudynamys scolopaceus*)

Asian Koel male (L) and female (R) (Sainikpuri, Oct 2008)

Order: Cuculiformes
Family: Cuculidae
Genus: *Eudynamys*
Species: *E. scolopaceus*
Size: 39-46 cm

Description & distribution: The Asian Koel is a large, long-tailed member of the Cuckoo family. Distributed across South Asia, China and South-east Asia, the species is sometimes regarded as a super-species, referred to as Common Koel, consisting of the Asian Koel, the Black-billed Koel (seen in the Sulawesi region) and the Pacific Koel (seen in Australasia) - although, increasingly, they are being considered as separate species due to differences in plumage, bill colour and voice.

The male of the nominate species is glossy bluish-black, with a pale greenish-grey bill, grey legs and feet, and crimson irises. The female of the nominate race has a brownish crown, and rufous streaks on the head. The upperparts and wing coverts are dark brown with white and buff spots, while the underparts are whitish but heavily striped. Young birds are similar to the male, but the bill is black.

The Asian Koel is normally seen in light woodlands and cultivation, though it has adapted to other habitats like urban green spaces. It is generally a resident breeder in most parts of its range.

Behaviour & Nesting: The Asian Koel is a very vocal species, and has several different calls ranging from the familiar *'koo-ooo'* of the male to the shrill *'kik-kik-kik'* of the female. Calls may also vary across populations.

The Asian Koel is omnivorous and subsists on a varied diet, including insects, caterpillars and small vertebrates, but a major component of its diet is fruit and berries, so much so that it may actually chase away other birds from a fruiting tree on which it is foraging. It has also been known to occasionally take the eggs of other small birds. Besides, it has adapted to urban surroundings, and is known to eat cooked food like boiled rice. Due to its large gape and the ability to ingest large fruit, the Asian Koel plays a significant role in the distribution of seeds of many fruiting plants, and more so in the case of sandalwood.

The Asian Koel breeds between March and August, but does not build a nest; instead, it is a brood parasite. Across its range, it has been observed to lay its single egg in the nest of a variety of host species, including Jungle Crow, House Crow, Common Myna, Long-tailed Shrike, Black Drongo, Black-headed Oriole, and European Magpie. In fact, the phenomenon is so well-known that Sanskrit literature of around 2000 BC referred to the Asian Koel as *'Anya vapa'*, meaning *'that which was raised by others'* or *'sown for others to reap'*.

The Asian Koel prefers host nests at low heights and close to fruit trees for brood parasitism. The male has been known to distract the host birds, so as to give the female a chance to lay the egg, though it is more common for the female to visit the host nest alone. The Koel does not usually lay the egg in an empty host nest; rather, it tends to lay the egg within 1-2 days after the host eggs are laid. The female may occasionally remove a host egg from the nest while laying its own, but the young Koel is usually observed not to do so.

Local name: The Asian Koel is known as *'koel'* in Hindi and Punjabi, *'kokila'* or *'kokil'* in Telugu, Marathi, Bengali and Assamese, and *'kuyil'* in Tamil and Malayalam.

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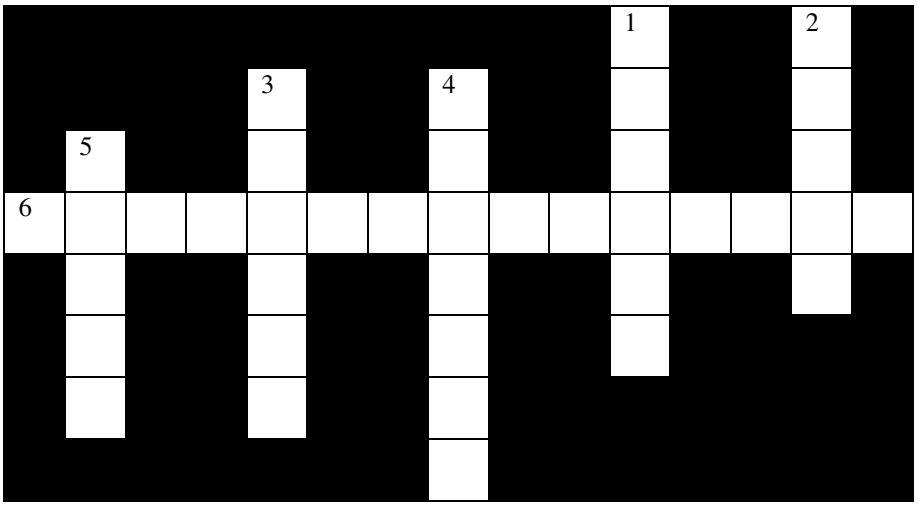
BIRDING CROSSWORD #27

Umesh Mani

The answers to the clues given below are bird names or other birding-related terms. Let's see how many you can find!
(*Solutions in next month's Pitta*)



ACROSS

6 - Agra isotherm runs endlessly to attract this bird (8,7)

DOWN

1 - Outsize prey lures the fish hawk (6)

2 - Alien plays low trick on this bird (5)

3 - Does this bird use a loom? (6)

4 - Rodent gets stuck in public transport at day-break (7)

5 - You never see one wearing a hood (5)

Solutions to Crossword #26 (Pitta, April 2014)
ACROSS: 1 – MARTIN, 2 - WRENS, 3 – TEALS, 4 – GOOSE, 5 - PLOVER
DOWN: 1- MERGANSER

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